

24 The passive

In most sentences, the subject carries out an action and the object receives it, or the result of it. In passive sentences, this is reversed: the subject receives the action.

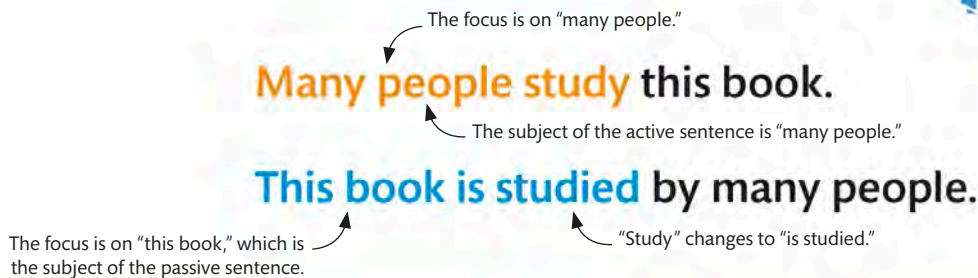
See also:

Present simple 1 Present continuous 4

Infinitives and participles 51

24.1 THE PRESENT SIMPLE PASSIVE

Passive sentences take emphasis away from the agent (the person or thing doing the action), and put it on the action itself, or the person or thing receiving the action. In the present simple passive, the present simple verb becomes a past participle.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

The passive is used when the agent is obvious, unknown, or unimportant. It is also useful when describing a process where the result of the action is important.



HOW TO FORM

All passives use a form of "be" with a past participle. The agent (the thing doing the action) can be introduced with "by," but the sentence would still make sense without it.



24.2 THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS PASSIVE

The present continuous passive is used to refer to ongoing actions.



PRESENT CONTINUOUS

Developers **are building** lots of new houses in the area.

Lots of new houses **are being built** in the area.

PRESENT CONTINUOUS PASSIVE

FURTHER EXAMPLES

You can't use the pool today because it **is being cleaned**.



I **am being interviewed** by a news channel tomorrow.



The robbery **is being investigated** by the police.



Don't worry, the food **is being cooked** as we speak.



We're living in a trailer while our house **is being rebuilt**.



Posters for the concert **are being put up** all over town.



The course **is being taught** by a well-known scientist.



I have to walk to work while my car **is being repaired**.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"AM / IS / ARE"

"BEING"

PAST PARTICIPLE

REST OF SENTENCE

New houses

are

being

built

in the area.

The thing that receives the action.

Present simple of "be."

The past participle describes what happens to the subject.

25 The passive in the past

English uses the passive voice in the past to stress the effect of an action that happened in the past, rather than the cause of that action.

See also:

Past simple **7** Past continuous **10**

Present perfect **11** Past perfect **13**

25.1 THE PAST SIMPLE PASSIVE

The past simple passive is used when referring to a single completed action in the past, focusing on the effect rather than the cause.



PAST SIMPLE

The fire **destroyed** the buildings.

PAST SIMPLE PASSIVE

The buildings **were destroyed** by the fire.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

The trees **were cut down** last year.



The rail road **was damaged** during the storm.



Two people **were injured** in the accident.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"WAS / WERE"

PAST PARTICIPLE

REST OF SENTENCE

The buildings

were

destroyed

in a fire.

The thing that receives the action.

"Was" is for singular subjects, and "were" is for plural subjects.

The main verb is a past participle.

25.2 THE PAST CONTINUOUS PASSIVE

The past continuous can also be used in the passive voice. It is used to refer to ongoing actions in the past.

PAST CONTINUOUS

Secret agents **were watching** him.



PAST CONTINUOUS PASSIVE

He **was being watched** by secret agents.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

The students **were being taught** how to write good essays.



By the time I got back to my car, it **was being taken away**.



I went for lunch while my car **was being fixed**.



The new secretary **was being shown** how to use the computer.



We bought our house while it **was being built**.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"WAS / WERE"

"BEING"

PAST PARTICIPLE

"BY" + AGENT

He

was

being

watched

by secret agents.

The thing that receives the action.

"Was" is for singular subjects, and "were" is for plural subjects.

The main verb is expressed as a past participle.

25.3 THE PRESENT PERFECT PASSIVE

The present perfect passive is used to talk about events in the past that still have an effect on the present moment.



PRESENT PERFECT

Don't worry, I **have fed** the cats.

PRESENT PERFECT PASSIVE

Don't worry, the cats **have been fed**.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

This door **has been painted** beautifully.



Do you know if all the lights **have been turned off**?



Has your computer been fixed yet? It broke months ago!



The subject and verb swap places to form questions.

The new parts **haven't been delivered** yet, so you'll have to wait.



All of the smoke detectors **have been replaced**.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"HAS / HAVE"

"BEEN"

PAST PARTICIPLE

The cats

have

been

fed.

The thing that receives the action.

"Been" stays the same no matter what the subject is.

The main verb is expressed as a past participle.

25.4 THE PAST PERFECT PASSIVE

The past perfect passive is used to refer to events that happened before another event in the past.

Unfortunately, the organizer **had canceled** the party.

PAST PERFECT

PAST PERFECT PASSIVE

Unfortunately, the party **had been canceled**.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

This part of the Arctic **had** never **been explored** before.



The class **hadn't been told** that the lecture **had been canceled**.



Sue didn't realize that the floor **had** just **been polished**.



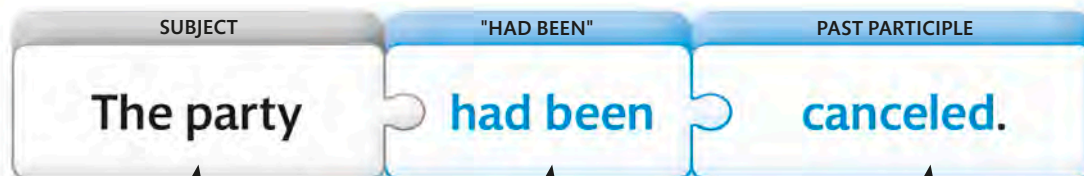
We were about to sing *Happy Birthday*, but the cake **had been eaten**!



Anna was so happy that her cat **had been found**.



HOW TO FORM



The thing that receives the action.

"Had been" stays the same with any subject.

The main verb is expressed as a past participle.

26 The passive in the future

English uses the passive voice in the future to stress the effect of an action that will happen in the future, rather than the cause of that action.

See also:

Future with "will" 18 Future perfect 21
Infinitives and participles 51

26.1 THE FUTURE SIMPLE PASSIVE

The future simple passive is usually formed with "will" rather than "going to."



FUTURE SIMPLE

Hopefully, the police **will catch** the thief very soon.

FUTURE SIMPLE PASSIVE

Hopefully, the thief **will be caught** very soon.

It is not known or important who will catch the thief.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Don't worry, the house **will be finished** very soon.



An email **will be sent** to you all next week with more details.



Sorry, but the power **will be turned off** between 2pm and 5pm.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"WILL BE"

PAST PARTICIPLE

REST OF SENTENCE

The thief

will be

caught

very soon.

The thing that
receives the action.

"Will be" doesn't change
with any subject.

The main verb is a
past participle.

26.2 THE FUTURE PERFECT PASSIVE

The future perfect passive is used to talk about events that will be finished at some point in the future.



FUTURE PERFECT

The mechanic **will have fixed** the car by 5pm.

FUTURE PERFECT PASSIVE

The car **will have been fixed** by 5pm.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

We think every ticket **will have been bought** before the end of the day.



Hurry up or all the good seats **will have been taken** already.



You should call early, otherwise all the tables **will have been booked**.



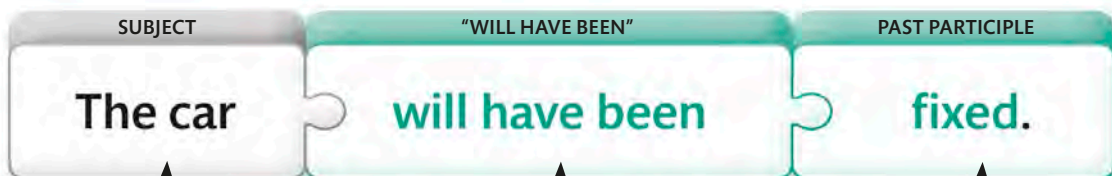
Come back tomorrow. The park **will have been cleaned** by then.



Will those letters **have been sent** out before lunchtime tomorrow?



HOW TO FORM



The thing that receives the action.

"Will have been" stays the same with any subject.

The main verb is a past participle.

27 The passive with modals

Modal verbs in English can be used in passive forms. As with other passive constructions, the emphasis changes to the object that receives the action.

See also:

Present perfect simple 11 Passive 24

Modal verbs 56

27.1 MODALS IN THE PRESENT PASSIVE

Modals in passive forms don't change. The sentence starts with the modal, then the verb "be" plus the past participle.



PRESENT WITH MODAL

You **should tell** Barbara the exciting news!

PRESENT PASSIVE WITH MODAL

Barbara **should be told** the exciting news!

FURTHER EXAMPLES



Should the package **be delivered** to your house or your office?

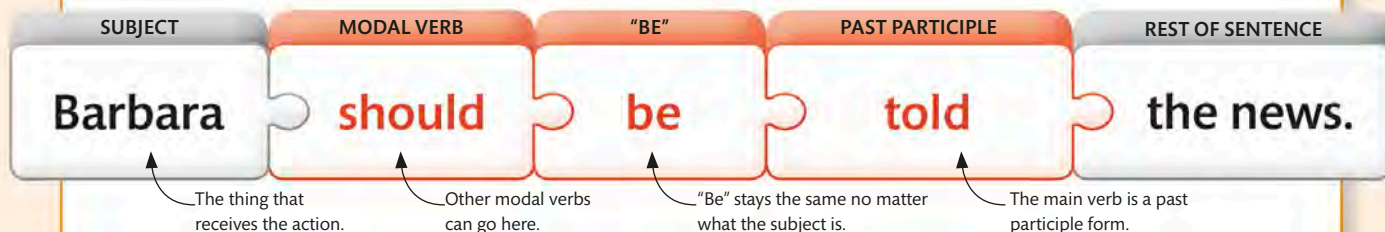


The treasure chest **can** only **be opened** with a special key.



All new employees **must be shown** what to do if there's a fire.

HOW TO FORM



27.2 MODALS IN THE PERFECT PASSIVE

Modals in perfect tenses can become passive by replacing "have" with "have been."



PERFECT WITH MODAL

The managers **should have given** Daniel more time.

PERFECT PASSIVE WITH MODAL

Daniel **should have been given** more time.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

We **should have been told** that the concert was canceled!



The robber **would have been arrested** if he hadn't been so quick.



The leaking pipe **might have been fixed** now. Should we ask?



Lots of people think that the fire **could have been prevented**.



HOW TO FORM



28 Other passive constructions

Many idioms in English use passive forms. Some idioms use standard rules for passive forms, while others are slightly different.

See also:

Passive voice 45 Reporting verbs 24

Defining relative clauses 81

28.1 REPORTING WITH PASSIVES

Some passive constructions are used to distance the writer or speaker from the facts. They are often used in academic writing or news reports.



"IT" + PASSIVE REPORTING VERB

"THAT" CLAUSE

It has been reported that three sailors have disappeared.

SUBJECT + PASSIVE REPORTING VERB

INFINITIVE CLAUSE

The race is known to be extremely dangerous.

"THERE" + PASSIVE REPORTING VERB

"TO BE / TO HAVE BEEN"

There are said to be at least 20 boats in the search party.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

It has been rumored that wolves live in these woods.



The worksite is said to be unsafe for workers.



There is thought to be a problem with crime here.



It has been revealed that some prisoners have escaped.



The new school is thought to have the best teachers in the country.



There are said to be pros and cons to moving abroad.



28.2 USING "GET" IN PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

"Get" can sometimes replace "be" in passive sentences.
This form is more informal than the passive with "be."



PRESENT SIMPLE PASSIVE

Bikes **get stolen** in this town every day.

My friend's bike **got stolen** yesterday.

PAST SIMPLE PASSIVE

FURTHER EXAMPLES

The windows **get washed** once a month.



This package **got delivered** today. I wonder what it is.



My laptop **gets updated** every week by the IT team.



I hope the air conditioning **will get fixed** soon.



More and more items are **getting recycled** these days.



Did you know that the company **was getting sold**?



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

His bike

"GET / GOT"

got

PAST PARTICIPLE

stolen

REST OF SENTENCE

yesterday.

The thing that receives the action.

A form of "get" is used instead of "be."

The past participle describes what happens to the subject.